

VZCZCXRO0521
RR RUEHMA RUEHPA
DE RUEHAR #0521/01 1081035
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 171035Z APR 08
FM AMEMBASSY ACCRA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6420
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ACCRA 000521

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DEPT FOR AF/FO, AF/W, AND AF/RSA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [GH](#)

SUBJECT: GHANA ELECTORAL COMMISSION AND PARTIES DEBATE PLAN
TO INVESTIGATE BLOATED VOTER REGISTERS

REF: ACCRA 339

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: In a contentious April 11 meeting of the Inter-Party Advisory Committee (IPAC), political parties criticized the Electoral Commission's (EC) lack of progress in investigating allegations that voter registers in NPP strongholds had been significantly inflated during the last election, with party representatives stressing that the issue goes to the credibility and integrity of the EC. The parties also sparred with the EC over procedures, and both major parties disagreed with the EC's admonition not to speak with the media following IPAC meetings. The EC disclosed that it has a shortfall of 2,500 digital cameras (i.e. half the number required) to update voter IDs. However, its recommendation to divide the country into two zones to conduct registration at separate times was roundly rejected by parties as providing an opportunity for dual registration, with opposition parties questioning the government's failure to provide adequate funding to the EC. END SUMMARY.

Parties Confront EC over Agenda/Process

12. (SBU) On April 11, POL Chief attended the second Inter-Party Advisory Committee (IPAC) meeting of 2008 at Ghana's Electoral Commission headquarters in Accra. The meeting was convened by EC Chairman Kwadwo Afari-Gyan, and attended by representatives of all registered political parties, members of the EC, and donor country representatives (the U.S., UK, Japan, Netherlands, and Canada). The meeting began contentiously with the National Democratic Congress (NDC), the People's National Convention (PNC), and the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) objecting to the order of agenda items introduced by Chairman Afari-Gyan (the first item on the agenda was a discussion of the process of updating the voter register), demanding instead that the allegedly bloated Ashanti voter registers, the principal subject of the March 4 IPAC meeting (reftel), be the first item discussed. The PNC also objected to the EC's failure to provide minutes or notes from the last IPAC meeting, a complaint that was vociferously seconded by NPP General Secretary Nana Ohene-Ntow.

13. (SBU) Ohene-Ntow added that the question of why there are contradictory sets of figures "goes to the heart of the Electoral Commission's integrity." Having an EC with integrity, he stressed, "is essential," and compared the EC's actions to "rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic."

14. (SBU) EC Chairman Afari-Gyan explained that the notes from the last meeting were not ready - that they were in his office but he had not had time to review them due to his travel to Zimbabwe to observe the election there. The EC Chairman also said that before the EC begins the registration process, it would provide "figures." However, he stressed that these would not be "fresh" registers, as the EC would be

working off of the registers from the previous election.

EC Criticizes Parties' Media Engagement

¶5. (SBU) Afari-Gyan then complained that several political parties (i.e. the NDC) had left the March 4 meeting and spoken directly to the media about IPAC discussions. This, said Afari-Gyan, went against the spirit of the IPAC, which had originally agreed to exclude the media to permit frank discussions. If parties are going to go directly to the press after the meeting, he said, "we might as well invite them to the meetings - think about this."

¶6. (SBU) The NDC argued that openness and transparency is important for good governance, and critical to the democratic process. It noted that it had brought up issues privately with the EC that were not addressed; however after speaking to the press, the EC responded to NDC concerns. NPP General Secretary Ohene-Ntow concurred with the NDC, arguing that

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press should not be present at the IPAC meeting, but said it is the parties' right and responsibility to inform the public and party members of the issues discussed at IPAC. However, party leaders should use discretion in their comments, and speak responsibly. The NPP's Dan Botwe also recommended that the EC itself brief the press after IPAC meetings to inform the public of the issues discussed.

Parties Object to EC proposals on Voter Register Updates

¶7. (SBU) Turning to the first agenda item, Afari-Gyan noted that due to funding shortfalls the EC was only able to purchase 2500 digital cameras, which are needed to produce

ACCRA 00000521 002 OF 003

voter identification cards to update the voter register. Because this was half the number required, the EC proposed to divide the country into two zones and conduct the register update on separate dates in each zone. Afari-Gyan said that Zone 1 would include: Western Region (452 electoral areas), Central Region (498), Greater Accra (236), Volta (517), and Eastern Region (691), for a total of 2394 electoral areas. Zone 2 would include: Ashanti (840), Brong Ahafo (582), Northern (546), Upper East (270), and Upper West (198), for a total of 2436. Afari-Gyan said that the process would begin in May and may extend into June.

¶8. (SBU) This suggestion encountered strong opposition from the parties. NDC National Organizer Ofuso Ampufo queried the EC on why it did not have sufficient cameras to conduct registration in all regions at the same time, and commented that this should have been in the EC's budget that was submitted to parliament. By doing the registration in two zones at separate times, he said, there would be no mechanism to prevent people from registering twice. Why, he asked, was it not possible to purchase 5,000 cameras? He recommended that the EC go back to the Ministry of Finance for funding.

¶9. (SBU) The NPP commented that the number of electoral areas provided by the EC was inconsistent with numbers provided at an earlier date. Dan Botwe said that discrepancies and imprecision in numbers from the EC was a serious problem, and said that the EC should ensure it is providing accurate information before the IPAC is convened. He urged that the EC avoid approximating and rounding up numbers." This criticism was echoed by the NDC, who called the approximations a "very serious issue." The NDC again stressed that it opposed the EC's two-zone proposal as opening the door to dual registrations, and that the process must take place in all regions simultaneously.

¶10. (SBU) The Chairman of the EC observed that there was a consensus that registration must take place at the same time,

"even if we must put districts together." The last point was then vociferously criticized by the opposition parties. The NDC warned that the EC should not "draw conclusions like that..." Some districts are already too big, it said. Having bought two aircraft for the President, said the NDC National Organizer, the government can afford to purchase 2500 more cameras for the EC.

¶11. (SBU) The chairman replied that the EC would take the size of electoral areas into consideration and develop a new plan at once. The NPP suggested that the EC "be creative and consider moving the workstations around." The NPP added that a major problem has been the lack of knowledge of where registration stations are, and said the EC needs to improve education efforts. The NDC also stressed the importance of ensuring that registration stations have adequate materials, to ensure that people are not turned away who want to register.

Bloated Registers in Ashanti

¶12. (SBU) The Chairman then turned to the discrepancies between the EC's figures for Ashanti voter registers and the figures "that were made available." The chairman acknowledged that the EC had provided figures to the NDC that showed figures in Ashanti that varied significantly from other numbers made available, and announced that the EC had decided to set up a committee to investigate the problem. (NOTE: As reported reftel, the discrepancy showed 13 districts in the NPP-stronghold Ashanti region with over 100% voter increases between 2004-06. END NOTE). The chairman said that the committee would include two representatives from the EC, one from the NDC, one from the NPP, one representing the other parties, one from the Statistical service, and one from another body such as the West African Examination Council (WAEC). However, this provoked opposition from the smaller parties, and in the end the EC agreed that the parties could appoint four representatives to the committee.

¶13. (SBU) The CPP representative again criticized the EC's failure to provide notes from the March 4 IPAC meeting, the lack of progress on the investigation to date, and the "lighthearted manner" with which the Chairman appeared to be treating the Ashanti register controversy, stressing again that the scandal affected the integrity of the EC and "the survival of the country." He also requested a description of the terms of reference for the investigative committee. The EC Chairman cut off the CPP representative in mid-sentence, stressing that the IPAC is "only an advisory body... the EC

ACCRA 00000521 003 OF 003

does not report to IPAC or to anyone."

¶14. (SBU) Concerning terms of reference for the investigation, the Chairman said they would be to: (1) determine the source of the discrepancy; (2) make recommendations in line with its findings; and (3) examine any related issues that might be referred to the committee.

Concluding Issues

¶15. (SBU) The meeting concluded with a brief discussion of a petition submitted to the EC by the NDC seeking additional polling stations in the Ashiedu Keteke district. While the Chairman asked the parties to study the proposal and provide feedback, the NPP objected to the discussion, noting that the issue (whether to increase the number of polling stations in an area) was a technical matter within the purview of the EC and not an appropriate matter for consideration by IPAC. The PNC asked the EC for assistance with training party polling agents, and the NDC urged greater efforts to educate the public on where to register.

¶16. (SBU) The EC Chairman concluded by briefing the parties on provisional figures for ID cards replaced in its recent exercise. Provisional results indicated 40,895 lost ID cards in the Western Region, 33,435 in Central Region, 59,410 in Accra, 29,734 in Volta, 36,782 in Eastern Region, 87,980 in Ashanti, 39,018 in Brong Ahafo, 19,593 in the Northern Region, 9,655 in Upper East, and 11,433 in Upper West. The total number of lost ID cards replaced in the exercise was 367,931.

¶17. (SBU) COMMENT: The discrepancy over the allegedly inflated Ashanti voter registers remains a volatile issue in Ghana, and the EC's lack of progress on the investigation is disappointing. With the 2008 presidential and parliamentary elections likely to be close, the EC's credibility has been called into question, and it is not clear whether it fully recognizes the seriousness of this issue. Nevertheless, the IPAC meetings are providing a key opportunity for parties and the EC to air out their differences, and the fact that they are being discussed in a frank manner nine months before the election provides an opportunity for the key stakeholders to address these issues. END COMMENT.

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